

# Symbols: Participant Brief

Communication Skills, Team Planning and Implementation, Process Improvement

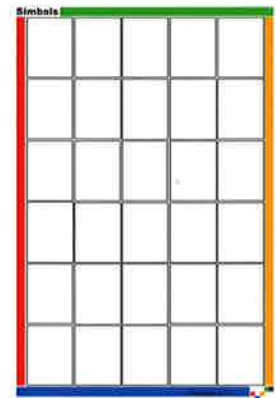
## THE TASK



Your task is to use the information which is printed onto 30 magnetic cards in order to place your cards into the correct position in the Symbols grid.

Your facilitator will only accept one pattern as the correctly completed grid. If correct, any two adjacent card edges will show matching halves of the same symmetrical symbol. No variations on this pattern will be accepted.

Information on your cards is individual and may be shared through verbal communication only – you are neither to show other people your cards nor to exchange cards at any stage of the exercise.



## THE PROCESS

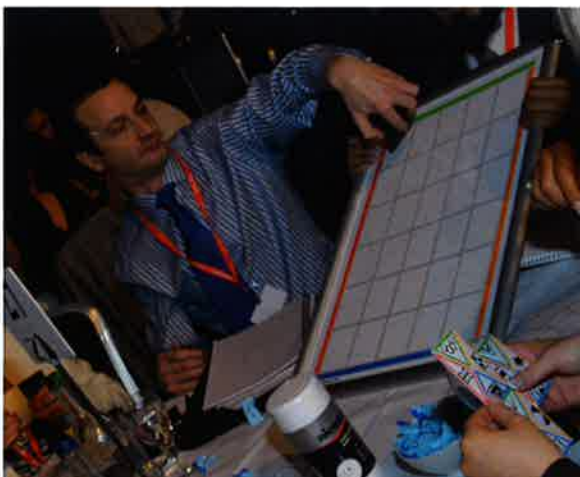


The first part of your task is to exchange information verbally about what is on your cards in order to determine which position each card needs to be placed in.

The second part of your task is to attach the cards to the grid to reveal the completed pattern. This will be done under 'time-trial' conditions so that, start to finish, the placement process takes no longer than 30 seconds.

At no stage in the activity may you write, draw, mark the grid or otherwise record any information whatsoever.

**The 30 second time trial will begin immediately upon completion of the planning process. There will be only one opportunity to complete the task.**



# Team Symbols: Participant Brief

Communication Skills, Team Planning and Implementation, Process Improvement

## THE TASK



Your whole team task is to use the information which is printed onto 30 magnetic cards in order to place your cards into the correct position in the Symbols grid.

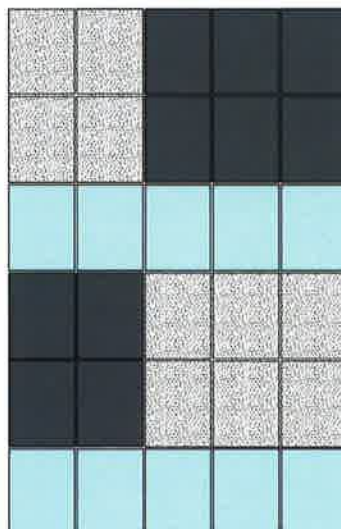
Your facilitator will only accept one pattern as the correctly completed grid. If correct, any two adjacent card edges will show matching halves of the same symmetrical symbol. No variations on this pattern will be accepted.

Information on your cards is individual and may be shared through verbal communication only – you are neither to show other people your cards nor to exchange cards at any stage of the exercise.

## THE PROCESS



Team Symbols Map



You begin the task in three sub-teams, each with responsibility for working out the location of 10 cards in the final grid. The cards you have will be either 'blocks' of 4 or 6, or rows of 5, as indicated by the colour-coded map.

The first part of your task is to exchange information verbally within your sub-team about what is on your cards in order to determine whether you have blocks or rows.

The second part of your task is to communicate with the other teams to find out where your cards are located in relation to theirs.

The final stage is to attach the cards to the grid to reveal the completed pattern. This will be done under 'time-trial' conditions so that, start to finish, the placement process takes no longer than 30 seconds.

At no stage in the activity may you write, draw, mark the grid or otherwise record any information whatsoever.

The 30 second time trial will begin immediately upon completion of the planning process. There will be only one opportunity to complete the task.

# Simbols: Facilitator Notes



Communication Skills, Team Planning and Implementation, Process Improvement

## ACTIVITY OVERVIEW



Simbols is a challenging activity that can be played in two different ways, either as a whole communications team (ideally between 5-16 people) or as three sub-teams, each responsible for part of the task.

To be succesful in this task, excellent communication is not enough: the team must also demonstrate excellent project planning and process improvement. Teams respond to the challenge the activity offers, enjoying ‘pitting their wits’ against the problem and seeing tangible proof of improving performance. In addition, they develop key skills that are of significant value in team briefing, coaching, instructing and delegating task responsibility to others.



Simbols is an exercise that can be used to tackle a wide range of learning objectives around individual and team communication skills, the development and implementation of a strategy, team planning and task delegation, and process improvement. It is also an excellent exercise to use on an international or cross-cultural awareness programme as it rapidly highlights different cultural references.

## LEARNING OBJECTIVES



During the exercise, teams must:

- Set up and manage an effective communication system that everyone understands and can use efficiently.
- Develop a dialogue which will lead to a common understanding of abstract concepts.
- Use an effective communications system to deliver a final process implementation stage.
- Deliver, against very tight time and quality targets, a successful solution to the problem they face.

## ACTIVITY DESCRIPTION



Each participant (up to 30 in total) has a number of printed magnetic cards. Each card fits into a specific place on a pre-printed grid. There is only one way in which the pattern can be assembled correctly and only one opportunity, at the end of a planning period, to assemble the grid. The participants cannot show or exchange their cards to each other and are reliant upon high quality verbal communication only, to solve their problem. At the end of the exercise they assemble the grid against the clock. In the Team Simbols version, 3 x sub-teams solve part of the grid puzzle before coming together as one team for the final time trial.

A period of around 30 - 45 minutes intense verbal information exchange and planning, leads to a high energy 30 second implementation finale.

The design of the Simbols activity and the complexity of the information can lead to confusion, ambiguity and uncertainty. To avoid this, precise descriptive language and careful feedback and checking skills must be applied. However, this happens in a context of time pressure, in which implementation must be ‘right first time’.

# Simbols: Facilitator Notes



Communication Skills, Team Planning and Implementation, Process Improvement

## ACTIVITY MATERIALS

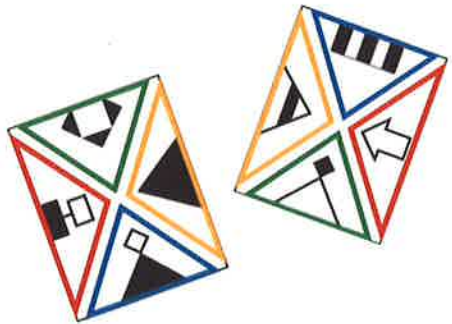


The materials supplied will enable you to work with the recommended group of up to16 people.

You will need enough working space to ensure that the large team can work together or the 3 sub-teams version can work independently (either in a large room or in separate break-out rooms) before coming together. The game grid should be placed somewhere visible to the group where they can access it for the final time trial (a flip chart stand works well).

The materials supplied with each set of this activity include:

- 1 x A2 metalised board and carrying case
- 1 x pre-printed A2 Simbols grid
- 1 x A4 laminated Simbols brief
- 3 x A4 laminated Team Simbols briefs
- 3 x A4 laminated Team Simbols Maps
- 30 x magnetic cards
- 1 x Facilitator Manual, including full instructions and review notes



## ACTIVITY TIMESCALE



An ideal time scale for this activity is given below. However, timings are flexible and may be altered to fit the time-frame that best fits your organisation.

0 - 5 minutes	Introduction to the activity and general description, allocation of materials
5- 10 minutes	Group(s) reading of Brief(s) process questions
10 - 55 minutes	Activity time and final 30 second time trial
55 - 85 minutes	Activity review and summary of learning





# Simbols: Facilitator Notes



Communication Skills, Team Planning and Implementation, Process Improvement

## SETTING UP THE ACTIVITY



Before beginning the exercise you need to prepare as follows:

1. Place the Simbols grid on the A2 game board in view of the group(s)
2. Place the laminated A4 Simbols briefing sheet, or a copy of the Team Simbols briefing sheet, where the group can refer to it during the exercise
3. Take the magnetic Simbols cards and mix them up
4. Place participants where they can see the grid but cannot see each other's cards
5. Tell participants that at the start of the exercise you will distribute the cards as evenly as possible between group members
6. Ask participants not to show each other their cards or exchange cards at any time

## BRIEFING THE ACTIVITY



1. Show participants the Simbols grid and tell them that this will be the base pattern into which the cards must be fitted.
2. Refer the participants to the instructions on the A4 Simbols or Team Simbols briefing sheet. These may be read aloud if appropriate.
3. Answer any questions of procedure and indicate the time allowed: 45 minutes is recommended and 30 minutes is required.

## DURING THE ACTIVITY



1. Check that no one is able to see anyone else's cards.
2. Give time-checks and coach if you feel this is necessary.
3. At the end of the 45 minute preparation time, call for the time-trial. This should be a strict 30 second time period and is the only chance the participants have to complete the task.
4. Time their efforts and announce their completion time.
5. The role of the coloured triangles and the coloured borders on the game board may come up. This is not mentioned in the briefing. Do not explain this to the group: if asked, simply reply that the colours are 'significant'. They should work out for themselves that the colours help them to orientate the cards eg. holding all cards with the green triangle on the top.

## REVIEWING THE ACTIVITY



1. Allow at least 30 minutes to de-brief the exercise.
2. Prepare your own set of relevant questions or use the suggested ones on the review sheets that follow.

# Simbols: Participant Brief



Communication Skills, Team Planning and Implementation, Process Improvement

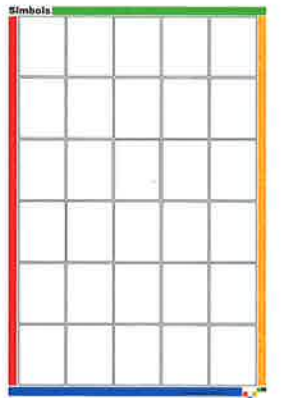
## THE TASK



Your task is to use the information which is printed onto 30 magnetic cards in order to place your cards into the correct position in the Simbols grid.

Your facilitator will only accept one pattern as the correctly completed grid. If correct, any two adjacent card edges will show matching halves of the same symmetrical symbol. No variations on this pattern will be accepted.

Information on your cards is individual and may be shared through verbal communication only – you are neither to show other people your cards nor to exchange cards at any stage of the exercise.



## THE PROCESS



The first part of your task is to exchange information verbally about what is on your cards in order to determine which position each card needs to be placed in.

The second part of your task is to attach the cards to the grid to reveal the completed pattern. This will be done under 'time-trial' conditions so that, start to finish, the placement process takes no longer than 30 seconds.

At no stage in the activity may you write, draw, mark the grid or otherwise record any information whatsoever.

**The 30 second time trial will begin immediately upon completion of the planning process. There will be only one opportunity to complete the task.**



# Simbols: Review Sheet



Communication Skills, Team Planning and Implementation, Process Improvement

## REVIEW TOPIC 1: USING SIMBOLS IN A COMMUNICATION SKILLS TRAINING PROGRAMME



In this application of the learning tool, the emphasis is on the communication skills in the group. Communicating effectively involves making choices. One fundamental choice is the selection of the medium of communication – and never have more options been available to us. But however good the communication systems we put in place, achieving genuinely shared meaning ultimately depends upon the quality of the content we choose. In this activity, it is essential that everyone communicates, clearly and accurately, the information they have. They need the small parts of the puzzle to build the whole picture.

In this use of the exercise, it is unlikely that a team leader or co-ordinator would be appointed, although one (or more) may emerge as the activity develops. Instead, the group should be allowed to determine their own ‘communication flow’ and the way in which they manage this will be one of the interesting aspects of the review process. The facilitator can focus the learning about this aspect of communication by asking open questions such as,

- How were people encouraged to contribute?
- How were quieter, more reserved people brought into the dialogue?
- What type of questions were the most useful?
- Can you give examples of what you felt was effective communication?
- How were the cards described to ensure accurate understanding?
- How were descriptions modified to eliminate uncertainty or ambiguity?
- How was understanding checked?
- How did individuals adapt their own preferred styles of communication to suit the needs of others?
- What communication systems were put in place to manage the volume of information?

This style of questioning enables the group to identify the skills that were applied in order to make the exercise successful. If the learners failed to complete the task, the questions can help them to use their experience to understand the reasons for their failure. Examples might be:

- Recognising the difficulties you experienced in agreeing a strategy for the exercise, what could you change about the way in which information is shared in this group as you move forward together?
- There were some clear differences in the type of language used to describe the same symbols, which led to misinterpretation. What could you change in future to ensure that you have reached genuine understanding with someone who prefers a different communication style to your own?

Recognising the need for a facilitator to make sensitive interventions, there are opportunities in the exercise for skills coaching. The facilitator can choose to reflect back to the group observations in order to help them to develop the new skills they need. A typical example of such an intervention would be,

- “I have noticed that there is some confusion around the symbol you are describing as ‘the necklace’. This is causing a real problem with your numbering system. Can you work together to identify what is causing the confusion and to use careful description to check each other’s understanding of this terminology?”

# Simbols: Review Sheet



Communication Skills, Team Planning and Implementation, Process Improvement

## REVIEW TOPIC 1: (CONTINUED)



- In summary: in Communication Skills training focus on:
- The communication systems established.
  - The communication patterns within the group.
  - The quality and flexibility of descriptive language.
  - The clarity with which instructions are given.
  - The variety of questions and the quality of listening to the responses.
  - The opportunities created for feedback, clarification and summary of dialogue.

## REVIEW TOPIC 2: USING SIMBOLS IN A PROJECT MANAGEMENT TRAINING PROGRAMME



In this application of the learning tool, the emphasis is on the task and resource (including human resource) management within the team. The focus is on the task processes that will ensure project completion to a quality standard within a given time-frame.

Whilst the facilitator will not ignore the communication patterns within the team, the focus of the observation and review will be on task achievement.

Within the exercise, there is a need for many of the elements of successful project management:

- Clarity of goals and quality standards.
- Effective allocation and management of time.
- The development of a clearly expressed and agreed strategy.
- A structured plan with enough flexibility to cope with changes or developments during the course of the project.
- On-going process improvement and a willingness to make a step-change if necessary to achieve the goal.
- Reliable information management.
- Effective delegation of individual responsibility.

These are the areas that will offer the most relevant and applicable learning to the participants in this training context. Therefore, the facilitator should structure the coaching and review activities around these issues.





# Simbols: Review Sheet



Communication Skills, Team Planning and Implementation, Process Improvement

## REVIEW TOPIC 2: (CONTINUED)



In this exercise, the learning is likely to be greater if a project manager is appointed in advance. The role of the manager, the manager's performance and the effects of this on the task and the team will offer significant opportunities for reflection and conceptualisation. One option is to appoint a project manager before the exercise is briefed. Another option is to select the project manager, based on expertise or development need, once the exercise has been described.

The participants need to address questions such as:

*How clear was the objective at the start of the exercise?*

*How well did the project manager brief the team, respond to questions and clarify expectations?*

*What were the responsibilities accepted by the project manager and what responsibilities were delegated to the team?*

*What was the process for determining the strategy and how well was this managed?*

*In what ways did the project manager monitor performance and ensure that deadlines and quality standards would be achieved?*

*How was the expertise available in the team accessed and used during the project?*

*How did the project manager deal with problems and how were staff motivated during the 'difficult' parts of the project?*

*How was the implementation process agreed, rehearsed and perfected?*

These are only a sample of the type of questions required. However, it is clear how the facilitator's emphasis has changed from our first example of communication skills training.

In this context, there is much more need for a focus on the role of one individual – the project manager. However, the individuals in the project team are also responsible for 'allowing the manager to manage' so their behaviours and contributions should also be reflected upon.

In this training context the participants are learning from experience the things that contribute to good project management. They are likely to identify 'best practices' and these can be compared with models offered by the trainer, thus allowing exploration of the theory and business evidence for recommended project management processes. In order to support this, 'hard data' can be used. Examples of this are:

*The measured improvement in the time taken to complete the grid over a number of 'practice runs'.*

*The number of errors in the initial placement of cards that had to be corrected within the action period of the task.*

These 'measures', and an exploration of how errors were corrected, processes improved and quality standards driven up, offer enormous potential for understanding how to make the best use of available resources to achieve complex tasks.

# Simbols: Review Sheet



Communication Skills, Team Planning and Implementation, Process Improvement

## REVIEW TOPIC 3: USING SIMBOLS IN A LEADERSHIP TRAINING PROGRAMME



There are clearly some overlaps in project management and leadership skills. However, in the context of leadership training, a facilitator can use Simbols to focus on a leader's ability to create a vision and strategy, motivate and empower a team, coach and develop others, manage the relationships between disparate parts of an organisation and maintain an overview of the 'big picture'. As in the previous example, it is important to nominate the leader for this activity in advance of the exercise.

To address the leadership skills identified above, the exercise is set up in a different way (see instructions for 'Team Simbols'). The participants work in 3 sub teams, each working on part of the project and then coming together to complete the task before the deadline. This represents the leadership need to manage different teams, overcome 'cultural difference' and deliver an integrated solution to the presenting problem.

In order to emphasise the leadership role in the exercise, the facilitator briefs the leader alone. The three sub-teams are physically separated to work on the first part of the activity and will only come together if and when the leader decides this is appropriate.

The leadership challenges offered by this form of the exercise include:

*Can the leader brief the team on their objectives, oversee the development of the strategy and then move away from operational involvement?*

*How does the leader manage the relationship between the groups?*

*Is there an attempt to create a set of common values or operating guidelines before teams become involved in problem-solving?*

*At what point does the leader integrate the groups?*

*How are the different operational styles and systems merged?*

*How does the leader maintain the commitment of team members, even if the task is unlikely to be achieved?*

*What evidence is there of the leader adopting a developmental coaching style in order to improve individual and team performance?*

As in the project management context, there is need for a focus on the role of one individual – the leader. This is a clear opportunity to reflect on the role of the leader, the expectations of leader and team (are they in harmony or is their interpretation of the role different?) and the leadership behaviours demonstrated.

# Simbols: Review Sheet



Communication Skills, Team Planning and Implementation, Process Improvement

## REVIEW TOPIC 3: (CONTINUED)



The participants need to address questions such as:

*Did the leader set the context, give the overview briefing and then allow team members to determine how to tackle the task?*

*What role did the leader take during the exercise? How effectively was the role carried out?*

*How did the leader motivate and engage the participants? How was motivation maintained, especially during the repetitive, routine parts of the task? How was the relationship between teams managed?*

*Did the leader create a sense of one team, working towards a shared organisational goal?*

*How did the leader demonstrate a commitment to organisational values and standards?*

*How did the leader utilise and develop the individual skills and talents within the teams?*

These questions can be compared with those used on the project management training. It is easy to see that the content and focus is different, reflecting the difference in leadership and management responsibilities.

In summary: in Leadership training focus on:

*The role of the leader in relation to the team members' expectations.*

*The developmental ability of the leader: developing people as part of the leadership role.*

*The ability to maintain an overview, see connections between parts of the picture and keep the focus on the organisational outcomes.*

*The demonstration of organisational values and standards in the leadership behaviour.*



# Simbols: Review Sheet



Communication Skills, Team Planning and Implementation, Process Improvement

## REVIEW TOPIC 4: USING SIMBOLS IN A COACHING SKILLS TRAINING PROGRAMME



More and more line and operational managers are taking on additional responsibility for the professional development of their staff. Most, at a minimum, find themselves implementing some kind of Performance Management process and therefore working 1:1 with their direct reports, assessing performance and setting new objectives. Some, perhaps the more confident ones, take on an active coaching or mentoring role and in this way make their skills and experience available in the wider organisation. However this coaching manifests itself, there are a number of key skills involved.

*Discriminating between effective and ineffective behaviours.*

*Offering non-judgmental feedback on the effects of those behaviours.*

*Using effective coaching questions to support others in developing their own skills and ideas.*

*Helping others to set realistic, specific and achievable targets.*

For many non-specialist managers, these 'soft skills' are the ones they feel least confident about. Few have had any formal training and many have actively avoided situations requiring them to deal with poor performance, preferring either to remove people from their teams, tolerate failure or hand over problems to HR or other specialists. A few managers have the natural ability and charisma, coupled with the respect of their staff, that allows them to manage talent in their teams, grow the confidence and capability of their employees and manage disciplinary issues without any apparent effort. For most managers, it is a learned and practised skill.

Using an experiential activity such as Simbols allows managers to understand some basic principles and then practise the skills in action. The activity provides:

*A safe learning environment.*

*A wide range of observable behaviour.*

*Opportunities to give and receive feedback under controlled conditions.*

*Opportunities to coach others towards performance improvement in a task in which results can be measured.*

In order to build these skills the focus is on observers, rather than participants, in this activity.





# Simbols: Review Sheet



Communication Skills, Team Planning and Implementation, Process Improvement

## REVIEW TOPIC 4: (CONTINUED)

### SETTING UP THE ACTIVITY

Divide the group into 2, identifying half the group as ‘players’ and half as ‘observers’. Ask the observers to make notes during the course of the exercise about the performance of an individual they have been nominated to observe.

Build the confidence of the observers by coaching them to focus on a simple set of observation tasks and questions that will enhance the quality of their observation and will begin to develop non-judgemental observation and feedback skills.

### DURING THE ACTIVITY

Typical instructions for the observer are:

Make a note each time your participant (in this example, David) makes a contribution to the task.

1. Write down what you saw and what you heard, without making any ‘value judgement’ about it.  
*eg. “David suggested that they clarify the instructions and agree their objective again. He spoke quietly and without looking at the team leader.”*
2. Write down the effect that the observed behaviour had - or the reaction that it received.  
*eg. “David’s suggestion was ignored by most members of the group.  
The person sitting next to David nodded agreement but when she asked David to repeat and develop his idea he declined to do so.”*

When you have made a number of observations, look to see if there are any patterns in the behaviour you have observed or in the reactions it receives.

3. Write down any significant patterns that you feel it would be useful for the participant to know.  
*eg. “David speaks quietly and without a great deal of apparent confidence. He pays a lot of attention to details and this seems to irritate some of the team members. David’s comments are often received as critical by other members who do not appear to value his opinion, even when he is technically correct.”*
4. Write down a change that you would like to see David make in order to be more effective in the group.  
*eg. “I would like to see David speaking up and showing more confidence and enthusiasm. I would like to see him looking at the person he is speaking to when he wants to express his opinion. I suggest that he focuses more on offering an alternative option to try, rather than criticising the current plan. In this way I believe his contributions will be received more positively by the team.”*

Using the material gathered from the observation task, the observers prepare to offer feedback to the person they observed

# Simbols: Review Sheet



Communication Skills, Team Planning and Implementation, Process Improvement

## REVIEW TOPIC 4: (CONTINUED)

### REVIEWING THE ACTIVITY

Again, the facilitator works with the observers, introducing guidelines in the way the feedback is given. The observers prepare their feedback in three parts.

1. *This is what I observed during the exercise.*
2. *This is the effect that the behaviour had.*
3. *This is what I would like to see you do in future.*

Facilitators make sure that the feedback is specific, using examples where possible, and non-judgemental.

Observers then ask the players for their responses to the feedback and ask them how they might be able to apply it in future exercises or in the workplace.

In summary: in Coaching Skills training focus on:

*The observer. The facilitator models coaching methods by coaching the observers in their role.  
The quality of observation and the skills required to discriminate between effective and ineffective behaviour.  
The quality and presentation of feedback offered to the participants during, and subsequent to, the activity.*

The coach’s role in supporting the development of an application plan: how does the coach work with a learner to set goals and create an achievable action plan?



# Team Simbols: Facilitator Notes



Communication Skills, Team Planning and Implementation, Process Improvement

## ACTIVITY OVERVIEW



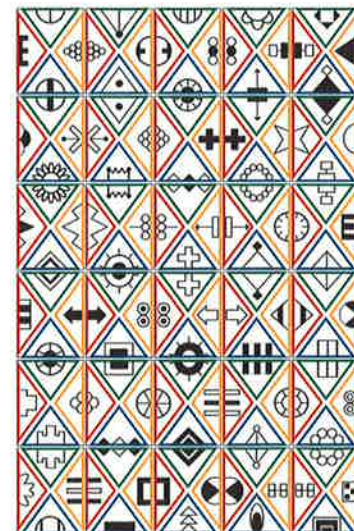
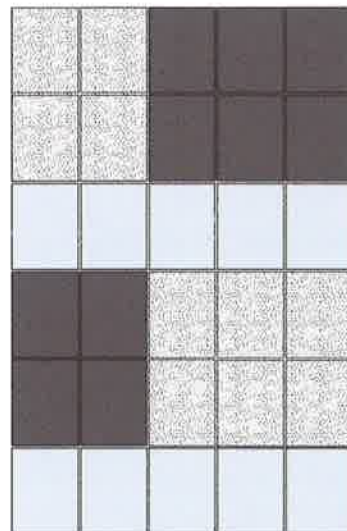
Whilst Simbols was originally designed to allow individuals to work in a big team context, it is also valuable as an opportunity to explore the relationships between sub-groups. In the 'team' version of Simbols, the group should be divided into three sub-teams of roughly equal numbers (ideally 3/4 people).

## SETTING UP THE ACTIVITY



Before beginning the exercise you need to prepare as follows:

1. Place the Simbols A2 sheet on the toolsets board and attach all the cards correctly as per the solution sheet provided.
2. Refer to the Team Simbols Map and remove each block of 10 cards as shown, providing three groups of pre-sorted cards. Each sub-team will receive one set of 10 cards. This may be done at random. However, the group with the two rows of cards will typically finish first so you may wish to decide which group you want in this position.
3. Divide participants into three sub-teams. Allocate each a separate working space where they can see the Simbols Grid but cannot see each other's cards and can concentrate on the discussion in their own sub-team.
4. Take each separate set of 10 cards, shuffle them and give one set to each sub-team, dealing them out to the players like a deck of cards. Ask them not to show each other their cards or exchange cards at any time.



# Team Simbols: Facilitator Notes



Communication Skills, Team Planning and Implementation, Process Improvement

## BRIEFING THE ACTIVITY



1. Show participants the grid and tell them that this will be the base pattern into which the cards must be fitted.
2. Refer the participants to the instructions on the briefing sheet. These may be read aloud if appropriate. Illustrate how the colour-coding on the map indicates the blocks of ten cards.
3. Ask each sub-team to indicate to you when they know how each of their ten cards should be arranged on the final grid.
4. Answer any questions of procedure and indicate the time allowed: 45 minutes is recommended and 30 minutes is required. Tell them when the 30 second time trial will begin and indicate that the planning time has now started.

## DURING THE ACTIVITY



1. Check that no one is able to see anyone else's cards.
2. Give time-checks and coach if you feel this is necessary.

Typically, the group with two rows will finish first. if so, ask them,

*"How will you find out where your rows go in the final grid? What questions will you ask of the other teams and how will you do this? " Please discuss this and prepare a plan while the other groups finish."*

3. Whichever sub-teams finish first, ask them to consider how they will manage the final assembly process. Ask:

*"How will you find out where each card goes in the final grid? Do you have a process for the final, timed assembly in which you must place all 30 cards on the grid in 30 seconds? If not, please prepare one."*

4. At the end of the 45 minute preparation time, call for the time-trial. This should be a strict 30 second time period and is the only chance the participants have to complete the task.
5. Time their efforts and announce their completion time.
6. The role of the coloured triangles and the coloured borders on the game board may come up. This is not mentioned in the briefing. Do not explain this to the group: if asked, simply reply that the colours are 'significant'. They should work out for themselves that the colours help them to orientate the cards eg. holding all cards with the green triangle on the top.

## REVIEWING THE ACTIVITY



1. Allow at least 30 minutes to de-brief the exercise.
2. Prepare your own set of relevant questions or use the suggested ones from the review sheets provided for the single team task.



# Team Symbols: Facilitator Notes

Communication Skills, Team Planning and Implementation, Process Improvement

## **Symbols: Correct solution**

Use this to position the cards before collecting the sets of 10 for Team Symbols.

